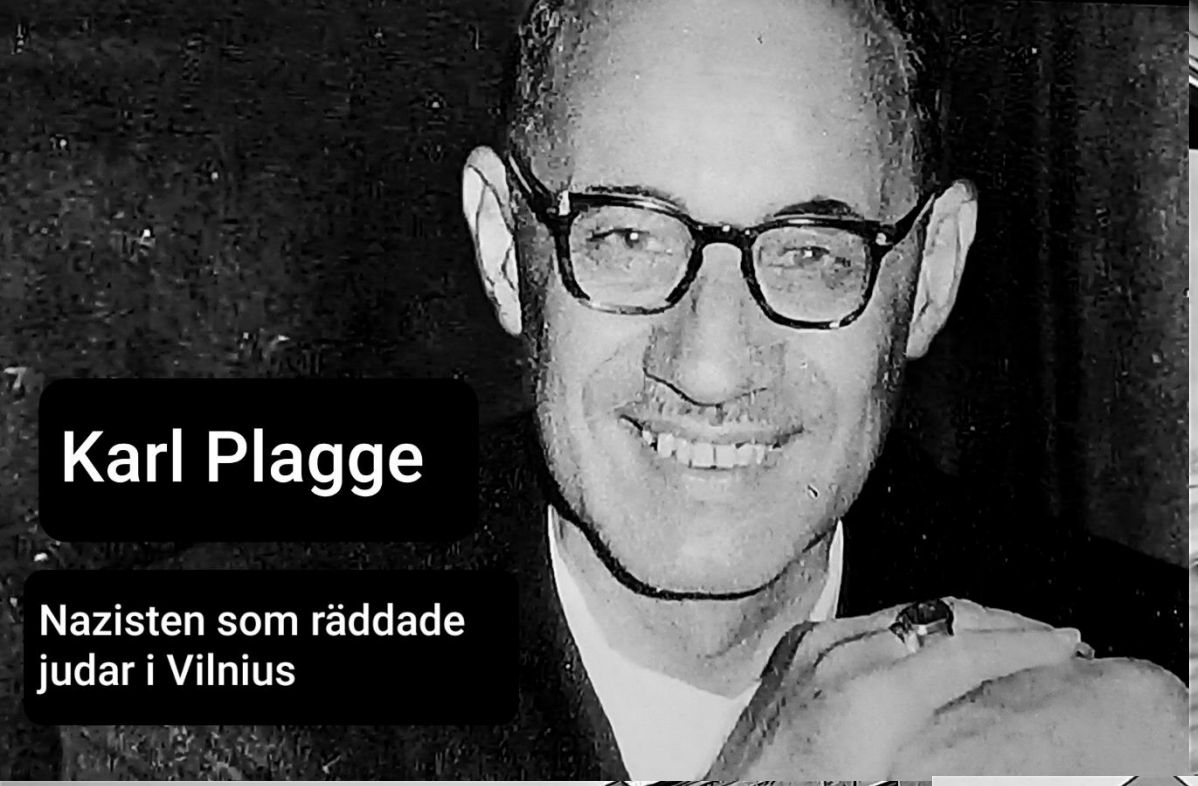
Karl Plagge
Nazisten som räddade judar i Vilnius



Karl Plagge

Nazisten som räddade judar i Vilnius

Plagge ordnade arbete vilket försenade dödandet av judarna

Karl Plagge Nazisten som försökte rädda judar i Vilnius

200 barn togs i en räd och dödades

VILNIUS

Karl Plagge

Karl Plagge 10 July 1897 – 19 June 1957), originally an engineer, was a German Army officer, who rescued Jews during the Holocaust in Lithuania by issuing work permits to non-essential workers. A partially disabled veteran of World War I, Plagge studied engineering, and joined the Nazi Party in 1931 in hopes of helping Germany rebuild from the economic collapse caused by the draconian terms of the Treaty of Versailles. After being dismissed from a position of lecturer for being unwilling to teach racism, and his opposition to Nazi racist policies, he stopped participating in party activities in 1935, and left the party when the war broke out.

Lithuanian collaborator with Jewish prisoners, July 1941

During World War II, he used his position as a staff officer in the German Army to employ and protect Jews in the Vilna Ghetto. At first, Plagge employed Jews who lived inside the ghetto, but when it was due to be terminated in September 1943, he set up the HKP 562 forced labor camp, where he saved many male Jews by issuing them official work permits on the false premise that their holders' skills were vital for the German war effort, and their wives and children by claiming they would work better if their families were alive.

Aerial photograph of the former HKP 562 camp

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karl_Plagge#/media/File:HKP_Drone_image_2017_(20).jpg

Karl Plagge

Although unable to stop the SS from liquidating the remaining prisoners in July 1944, Plagge managed to warn the prisoners in advance, allowing about 200 to hide from the SS and survive until the Red Army's capture of Vilnius. Of 100,000 pre-war Jews in Vilnius, only 2,000 survived, of which the largest single group were saved by Plagge.

Plagge was tried before an Allied denazification court in 1947, which accepted his plea to be classified as a "fellow traveler" of the Nazi party, whose rescue activities were undertaken for humanitarian reasons rather than overt opposition to Nazism. Survivors he rescued testified on his behalf. Plagge died ten years after the trial.

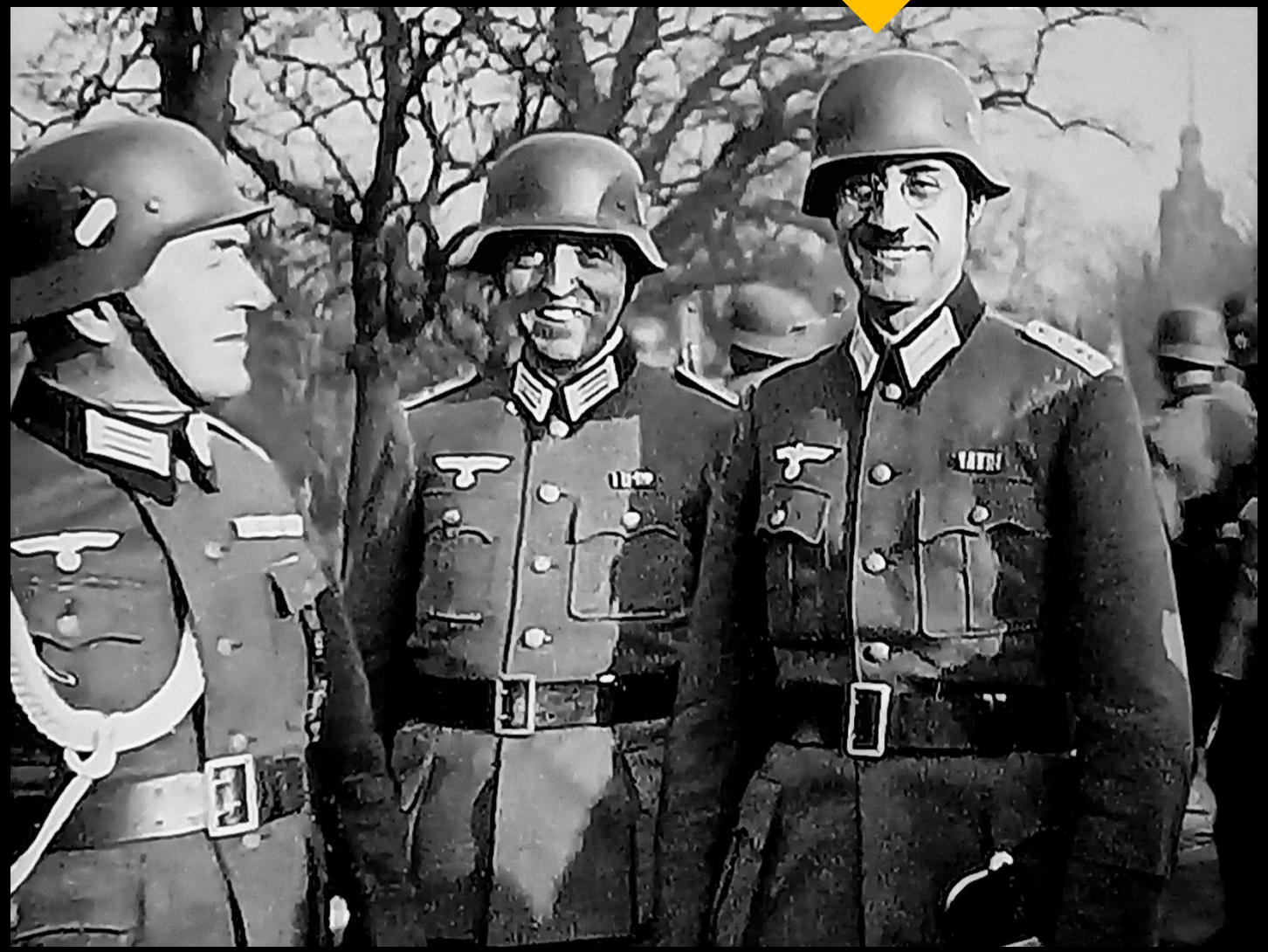
According to historian Kim Priemel, the success of Plagge's rescue efforts was due to working within the system to save Jews, a position which required him to enter a "grey zone" of moral compromise. In 2000, the story of his rescues was uncovered by the son of a survivor of HKP 562. In 2005, after two unsuccessful petitions, the Holocaust memorial Yad Vashem recognized him as one of the "Righteous Among the Nations".

Karl Plagge

Plagge was drafted into the Wehrmacht (German Army) as a captain in the reserve at the beginning of World War II, and stopped paying Nazi Party membership fees at the same time. Serving initially in Poland after the German invasion, he witnessed atrocities that caused him to decide "to work against the Nazis". In 1941, he was put in command of an engineering unit, Heereskraftfahrpark 562 (vehicle maintenance unit 562, or HKP 562; literally "Army motor vehicle park"), which maintained and repaired military vehicles. After the German invasion of the Soviet Union, HKP 562 was deployed to Vilna, Lithuania, in early July 1941. Plagge witnessed the genocide being carried out against the Jews of the area.

Plagge helped Jews by giving work certificates to Jewish men, certifying them as essential and skilled workers, regardless of their actual backgrounds. This kind of work permit protected the worker, his wife, and up to two of his children from the SS sweeps carried out in the Vilna Ghetto, in which Jews without work papers were captured and killed at the nearby Ponary execution grounds. As a work assignment, HKP 562 was particularly sought after by Jews because of Plagge's efforts to treat his workers well.

Karl Plagge



Plagge also made efforts to help Poles and Soviet prisoners of war forced to work for the Wehrmacht. Plagge was the "quasi-sovereign" of his unit, retaining his independence so long as the repair work got done, and worked to insulate his workers from the genocide perpetrated by the SS. He reassigned antisemitic or violent subordinates so that they did not interact with Jewish workers and turned a blind eye to the smuggling and black market that kept the workers alive. During the autumn of 1941, when many Jews were rounded up and shot in "Aktions", Plagge's workshop was the fourth-largest employer of Jews in Vilnius, with 261 work permits allocated.

When his workers were captured during sweeps, Plagge attempted to free them from Lukiškės Prison before they could be executed at Ponary. If only a few Jews were arrested, he sent a subordinate. However, in late 1941, 70 Jewish workers and their families were arrested. Plagge exaggerated their importance to the war effort and managed to secure the release of them all. In 1942, 200 Jews working for Plagge were rounded up for deportation. Plagge argued with SS-Obersturmführer Rolf Neugebauer in an attempt to secure their release, but was unable to save them. During 1943, after negotiations with the SS, Plagge was able to expand his workforce from 394 Jews in July to more than 1,000 when the ghetto was liquidated in September.

In the aftermath of the April 1943 Warsaw Ghetto uprising and an increase in Soviet partisan activity, Heinrich Himmler, the head of the SS, decided to liquidate all Nazi ghettos, regardless of the slave labor they provided to the Wehrmacht's war effort. In particular, the Vilna Ghetto was seen as a threat because of its extensive underground movement and the proximity of partisans in the woods around the city. Plagge, who had been promoted to major, secured permission from the SS to establish a Juden-KZ for HKP 562 on Subocz Street on the outskirts of Vilnius. HKP 562 was the only Wehrmacht unit allowed to retain Jewish workers.

On 1 September, about 300 of Plagge's workers were seized by the SS for transportation to the Klooga concentration camp. Plagge went to the train station to argue with an SS NCO, Bruno Kittel, who was in charge of the liquidation. Initially able to secure their release, Plagge left the Jews with subordinates, but Kittel's superior officer, SS-Obersturmführer Rolf Neugebauer, ordered them to be deported anyway. Plagge attempted to contact Neugebauer but was unable to, and the Jews were all deported to Klooga. He then ordered his subordinates to recruit other Jewish workers to replace those who had been deported.

On 16 September 1943, Plagge transported over 1,000 of his Jewish workers and their families from the Vilna Ghetto to the newly built HKP camp at 37 Subocz Street, where they remained in relative safety.[21] Plagge saved not only skilled male workers, but also their wives and children, arguing that the workers would not be motivated without their families.[22] Less than a week later, on 23 September, the SS liquidated the Vilna Ghetto. The rest of Vilna's Jews were either executed immediately at Ponary or sent to concentration camps in Nazi-occupied Europe.[18] A few Jews hid in the ruins of the ghetto; arguing that he needed more workers, Plagge brought 100 arrested Jews into HKP. Another 100 Jews were smuggled in by the resistance movement with Plagge's acquiescence, and the population peaked at 1,250 early in 1944.

March 1944, while Plagge was away on home leave in Germany, the SS carried out a Kinderaktion ("Children Operation"): they entered the camp, rounded up about 250 children and elderly Jews, and took them to Ponary for execution. Although Plagge claimed upon his return that he would have saved the children if he had been present, it is doubtful that he could have done so. Plagge's acquiescence to these killings made him "[in] moral terms... as much a collaborator" as a rescuer, according to Priemel. However, Plagge's collaboration was "arguably a rational choice", because he was able to save more Jews than any other Wehrmacht rescuer in Vilnius.

250 gömda
överlevde

HKP survivor Pearl Good points to Plagge's name on the Wall of the Righteous at Yad Vashem

In response to a question from the assembled Jews, Plagge added that there was no need to bring their luggage. When the SS came to the camp on 4 July, 500 Jews appeared at the roll call and were executed at Ponary. The rest either tried to escape or hid inside the camp. About 150 or 200 Jews survived the searches and were liberated by the Red Army on 13 July. Of the 100,000 Jews in Vilnius, only 2,000 survived the Holocaust; survivors of the HKP camp constituted the largest single group.

Perhaps others lacked only a little determination to act in the same way in order to prevent or reduce the horror. I have never felt that this work took special courage. It only required a convincing strength that anyone can draw from the depths of a moral conscience everyone has. Moreover it takes perhaps a bit of good will, occasionally a good idea and dedication to the task at hand. I never had the feeling that I was in great danger... Basically I am not a "hero" but a rather timid person.

Karl Plagge

Plagge's actions were very unusual; very few Wehrmacht soldiers helped Jews during the Holocaust.

After the War

After leaving Vilnius, Plagge led his unit westward and surrendered to the United States Army on 2 May 1945 without suffering a single casualty. Because he had joined the Nazi Party so early and commanded a labor camp where many prisoners were murdered, he was tried in 1947 as part of the postwar denazification process and hired a lawyer to defend himself. Plagge and his former subordinates told the court about his efforts to help Jewish forced laborers; Plagge's lawyer asked for him to be classified as a fellow traveler rather than an active Nazi. Former prisoners of HKP 562 in a displaced persons camp in Ludwigsburg told Maria Eichamueller[who?] about Plagge's actions. After reading about the trial in a local newspaper, Eichamueller appeared to testify on Plagge's behalf, which influenced the trial result in his favor. The court did not exonerate Plagge completely, because it believed that his actions had been motivated by humanitarianism rather than opposition to Nazism. The judges may have been reluctant to recognize the extent of Plagge's humanitarian achievements because they cast a bad light on the indifference of ordinary Germans to the Holocaust and the retention of Nazi judges in the postwar judicial system.[39] After the trial, Plagge lived the final decade of his life quietly and died of a heart attack in Darmstadt on 19 June 1957.